

Florenz Ziegfeld and the

ZIEGFELD FOLLIES



ORIGINAL RADIO BROADCASTS
A GEORGE GARABEDIAN PRODUCTION

Florenz Ziegfeld and the

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A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody • A Kiss In The Dark • Rio Rita • I Know That You Know • What a Life • When It's Apple Blossom Time • Normandy • Look For The Silver Lining

Florenz Ziegfeld's astonishing career, propelled by a shameless flair for publicity, led from a turn-of-the-century stint with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show to a two decade reign on Broadway, a reign marked by furious battles with his competitors, lawsuits, compulsive gambling at the tables and in the theatre, and by avid conflicts with the artistic greats of his day, musicians, writers, designers and stars. Ziegfeld, himself, presents something of an enigma. He was obviously endowed with initiative and daring, daring bordering on the reckless, imagination, charm (when he cared to exert it) and an ability to head straight for a given goal, even by uncharted paths. In the final analysis, however, he emerges as something of a modern Midas, converting dross into gold to fashion a fitting crown for his own superb ego. In any event, from about 1910 to the crest of his career in the late 1920's, Flo's vision of beautiful women, lavish spectacle and hit songs—all concocted with a blend of exquisite taste and forthright vulgarity—created an image for American musical theatre which not only marked him as the greatest showman of his age, but left a lasting imprint on theatre and motion pictures, both in America and abroad.

After Ziegfeld's divorce from the fading, embittered Anna Held in 1914, Flo had the good sense to marry entrancing Billie Burke, a star in her own right—"I was destined to be jealous of the entire Follies chorus as well as the Follies star list for the rest of my married life"—and it is she who has, perhaps, best limned Flo's genius as a showman. "The things Flo cherished were color, music, spectacle and comedy, and his genius was his towering ability to play one against the other. He went at

his productions like a painter who starts drawing at some unexpected point, adding here, splashing color there, changing his mind, erasing, making a bold stroke here, unable to conceive in advance the total effect he felt and aspired to, but somehow stirring and mixing the whole until he produced, out of utter conflict, that unique work of art, a great musical comedy."

It would be hard to say whether this alchemy was achieved at greater cost to himself—when producing a show Flo worked furiously in eighteen hour shifts—to his associates or to his backers. His writers and designers were harried to madness, and composers, among them Romberg, Kern, Friml, Gershwin and Berlin, fared no better. Victor Herbert became so infuriated with Ziegfeld that he suffered a fatal heart attack. Flo, as an artist, was, of course, most in his element with his Glorified Girls, but even their extravagant scenes were ruthlessly paced and edited, while the Girls themselves were subjected to grueling rehearsals and the strictest discipline, both on stage and off.

Though the name Ziegfeld is most identified with the twenty-one editions of his Follies (1907-1931), he also produced such stunning and innovative musicals as *Sally*, *Kid Boots*, *Whoopee*, *Rosalie*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Rio Rita*, and *Show Boat*. Among performers whose careers stemmed from Ziegfeld shows are such well remembered stars as Will Rogers, Eddie Cantor, Fanny Brice, Leon Errol, W. C. Fields, Marilyn Miller, Helen Morgan, Marion Davies, Ruby Keeler, Mae Murray, Ruth Etting, Dennis King and Paul Robeson. Ziegfeld's fame reached its zenith in the Twenties, a decade vividly mirrored in the extravagance of

his life and work. In 1927-28 he had five hits running simultaneously on Broadway, a theatre of his own, The Ziegfeld, America's most beautiful playhouse, a dazzling suite of offices furnished with rare antiques, a fabulous collection of good luck elephants, trunks erect, and three gold telephones.

On 29 October, 1929, the stock market crashed—Flo's losses totaled over a million—and with it the world of Flo Ziegfeld. The final Follies (1931) was a failure as were *Smiles* and *Hot-Cha*. In these last desperate efforts to retrieve his fortunes, Ziegfeld drove himself to the brink of madness; like an exploding star, he literally burned himself out, his disaster no less dynamic than his triumphs. Somehow, though on the point of complete breakdown, he managed to summon the strength to produce a weekly series for Chrysler, hosting the program himself, and using music, scenes and stars from his various productions. Listening one night from Santa Monica, Billie Burke, who was attempting to bolster the family fortunes with work in Hollywood, heard his voice falter, "It was only a little break, unnoticed by anyone else, but over three thousand miles, I caught the weariness and sickness of it." Arriving in New York, Billie found him a shadow of his former self. In her bungalow in Santa Monica, he rallied briefly, but extravagant to the last, he dispatched \$6,000 in telegrams and thousands more in telephone calls. "I know it's expensive, Baby," he remarked, "but you know I love the telephone." Pleurisy suddenly flared and Flo died in the Cedars of Lebanon Hospital on the afternoon of July 22, 1932. He was 64. In epitaph, Billie selected a quatrain from Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*:

For him being dead, with him is
Beauty slain;
And beauty dead, black chaos
Comes again.

A GEORGE GARABEDIAN PRODUCTION

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RANDOLPH CARTER

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—Randolph Carter is a television and film scriptwriter, playwright, and critic. He has written such Broadway shows as *Eugenia*, *Arms for Venus*, and a stage version of *Wuthering Heights*. He is also the author of *The World of Flo Ziegfeld*.

 **MARK 56**
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ZEIGFELD FOLLIES ON THE AIR

Produced by
George Garabedian

SIDE 1
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March 7, 1932

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ZEIGFELD FOLLIES ON THE AIR

Produced by
George Garabedian

SIDE 2
737-B

March 14, 1932

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